

New Militarism, the Media and the Manufacture of Warfare 1982-1991:
The Implications for Peace Journalism Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This article highlights the emergence of a distinctly new kind of militarism in the 1980s. There are three major strands to the strategy; all of them conducted simultaneously – each, significantly, accompanied by a particular form of media coverage. Secret warfare, away from the glare of the media, is the most important. US interventions in Chad are considered as a case study. Low intensity conflicts, such as in Libya during the 1980s, are next examined. Finally the media-hyped, manufactured “big” wars, such as over the Falklands/Malvinas Island in 1982, Grenada in 1983, Libya in 1986 and Panama in 1999 are considered. By the time US-led forces prepared to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait in January 1991, a military/media propaganda system had evolved which meant that any conflict could be fought in almost entire secrecy – even in the face of 24-hour media coverage. The article argues that peace journalism theory and practice need to acknowledge more the role of the secret armies in US/UK military strategies and the crucial part played by the media in the manufacture of New Militarist “warfare”.

Introduction: Problematizing “warfare”

Peace journalism theory has rightly problematized conventional representations and definitions of warfare. For instance, in their seminal *Peace journalism* (2005), Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick draw particularly on the peace research theories of Prof. Johan Galtung (1998) to argue that most conflict coverage, thinking itself neutral and “objective”, is actually war journalism. It is violence and victory orientated, dehumanizing the “enemy”, focusing on “our” suffering, prioritizing official sources and highlighting only the visible effects of violence (those killed and wounded and the material damage).

In response, peace journalism attempts to promote a radically different kind of reporting (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, p. 6). It is solution-orientated, giving voice to the voiceless, humanizing the “enemy”, exposing lies on all sides, highlighting peace initiatives and focusing on the invisible effects of violence (such as psychological trauma). All these elements are important. And yet the very notion of war needs to be further problematized if current US/UK militarism is to be both understood and challenged.

A distinctly new strategy evolved during a series of crucial UK/UK military adventures in the 1980s, which culminated in the 1991 Gulf conflict. There are three major strands to the strategy; all of them conducted simultaneously – each, significantly, accompanied by a particular form of media coverage. This article will examine the special characteristics of this New Militarism emerging during the 1980s and the crucial role that was played by the mainstream press. In addition, the article will seek to explain how the US/UK military elite was able to fight a conflict in 1991 in the face of 24/7 media coverage – and yet in almost total secrecy.

Secret warfare

Firstly, the most important military strategy is conducted in secret far away from the glare of the media. And yet peace journalism theory has failed to acknowledge the importance of secret warfare. Up until 1991, the dominant view reproduced in the mainstream media represented the state as having fought defensively only in exceptional cases since 1945. Accordingly, the Gulf “war” was represented as the consequence of a legitimate defensive response to an unprovoked attack by Iraqi president Saddam Hussein on innocent, vulnerable, tiny Kuwait (and, by implication, on vulnerable Western civilization). But such an interpretation grossly over-simplifies the complex nature of UK/UK militarism and most significantly obscures its offensive elements.

In fact, since 1945 the UK and the US have deployed troops somewhere on the globe at least once every year. As Steve Peak (1982, p. 10) points out, the Falklands “war” of 1982 was the 88th deployment of British troops since 1945. These deployments took place in 51 countries and nearly all of them in Africa, the Middle East, South-East Asia, the Far East, and around the Caribbean. Newsinger (1989) describes British intervention in Indonesia in 1945-1946 as a “forgotten war”. Britain’s longest running post-1945 campaign (leaving aside Northern Ireland) was in Malaya from

1948 to 1960. But this was never described as a war. Rose (1986) argues that British troops had been involved in more wars in more places across the globe than any other country since 1945.

In the case of the US, the investment in secret warfare is still greater than that of the UK. Cecil Currey (1991, pp. 72 – 73) argues that since 1950, America had used either force or its threat about 500 times, mostly in Third World countries. Former CIA agent John Stockwell (1991, pp. 70 – 73) suggests that the agency had been involved in three thousand major operations and ten thousand minor operations which had led to the deaths of six million people worldwide – mainly in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Africa and Central and South America. It had overthrown functioning democracies in more than 20 countries and manipulated dozens of elections.

Special forces such as the UK's SAS and the American Navy Seals, which are so crucial to secret warfare strategies, reportedly played important roles both in the build up to the 1991 Iraq conflict and during it. They were the subject of a series of “inordinately flattering” features in the US and UK media (Ray & Schaap, 1991, p. 11). Yet accounts of their daring deeds of courage and endurance, since they were shrouded in almost total secrecy, amount to a form of fiction (see de la Billière, 1995, pp. 319 – 338; Hunter, 1995, pp. 169 – 175; Kemp, 1994, pp. 191 – 197).

After the conflict, the SAS provided one of the dominant symbols of British heroism. Accounts of the fate of the lost SAS patrol – by “Andy McNab” (1994) and “Chris Ryan” (1995) – became bestsellers. As Newsinger (1995) comments:

... the image we are left with is of a lone British soldier, hungry and cold, being hunted down across the most difficult terrain by hundreds of Iraqis and still making good his escape ... These are tales of the underdog, of British masculinity triumphing against all the odds, over the lesser masculinity of a brutal enemy. In this way is the myth of the ‘soldier hero’, the myth of the SAS sustained. (p. 36)

In the end, the SAS's role in the Gulf conflict was probably only minor since the “enemy” largely refused to fight. Other aspects of secret warfare include the targeted assassinations of enemy leaders; secret prisons where detainees are questioned, tortured and even “disappeared” – and secret arms trading.

The Chadian case study of secret warfare in the 1980s

Formerly part of French Equatorial Africa, Chad gained its independence in 1960 and since then has been gripped by civil war. In a rare instance of coverage on May 21, 1992, the London-based *Guardian* carried four short paragraphs reporting how 40,000 people were estimated to have died in detention or been executed during the tyranny of Hissène Habré. A justice ministry report concluded that Habré had committed genocide against the Chadian people.

These were extraordinary events but all of them were hidden behind a virtual wall of silence in the West. Yet also hidden was the massive, secret war waged by the United States and Britain from bases in Chad against Libya. Grabbing power by ousting King Idris in a 1969 coup, Gaddafi (who, intriguingly, had followed a military training course in England in 1966) soon became the target of covert operations by the French, Americans, Israelis and British.

Stephen Dorril, in his seminal history of M16, records how in 1971 a British plan to invade the country, release political prisoners and restore the monarchy ended in an embarrassing flop (2000, pp. 735 – 738). Nine years later, the head of the French secret service, Alain de Gaigneronde de Marolles, resigned after a French-led plan ended in disaster when a rebellion by Libyan troops in Tobruk was quickly suppressed (Deacon, 1990, pp. 262 – 264).

Then, in 1982, away from the glare of the media, Habré, with the backing of the CIA and French troops, overthrew the Chadian government of Goukouni Wedeye. Bob Woodward (of Watergate fame), in his semi-official history of the CIA, reveals that the Chad covert operation was the first undertaken by the new CIA chief William Casey and that, throughout the decade, Libya ranked as high as the Soviet Union as the *bête noir* of the White House (Woodward 1987, pp. 348, 363, 410v – 411). A report from Amnesty International, *Chad: The Habré legacy* (2001), records massive military and financial support for the dictator by the US Congress. It adds: “None of the documents presented to Congress and consulted by AI covering the period 1984 to 1989 make any reference to human rights violations.”

US official records indicate that funds for the Chad-based covert war against Libya also came from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Israel and Iraq. The Saudis, for instance, gave \$7million to an opposition group, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya (also backed by French intelligence and the CIA). However, a plan to assassinate Gaddafi and seize power on May 8, 1984 was crushed (Hunter

1991). In the following year, the US asked Egypt to invade Libya and overthrow Gaddafi but President Mubarak refused. By the end of 1985, the *Washington Post* had exposed the plan after congressional leaders opposing it wrote in protest to President Reagan (ibid).

Then in 1990, with the crisis in the Gulf developing, French troops helped oust Habré in a secret operation and install Idriss Déby as the new President of Chad (ibid). The French government had tired of Habré's genocidal policies while George Bush senior's administration decided not to frustrate France in exchange for co-operation in its attack on Iraq. Yet, even under Déby, abuses of civil rights by government forces have continued.

Low Intensity Conflict

The second strand of US/UK military strategy is known in military-speak as Low Intensity Conflict (LIC). These are long-term military engagements, largely conducted in secret though occasionally given sporadic coverage in the media. Pentagon adviser John M. Collins, in his seminal analysis of LIC, points out (1991, p. 4): "All LICs are contingencies and technically transpire in peacetime because none have yet been declared wars." Focusing on just 60 examples over the last century, Collins shows that 33 percent of his sample exceeded 10 years while 57 percent lasted less than five years. A feature of American strategy since the beginning of the 20th century, it developed still further as an offshoot of the nuclear standoff between East and West during the Cold War and in response to the US defeat in Vietnam.

As Halliday (1989, p. 72) argued: "LIC theorists insisted that US combat forces should not be involved in the long-run, Vietnam style operations. The 'lesson' drawn here from Vietnam was that the US effort failed because it was too direct and too large. Significantly Collins' sample showed LICs mounting substantially in the post Vietnam, New Militarist era. During the 1980s, LIC strategists "came out" in the US and UK where numerous conferences were held and strategy documents were compiled exploring the concepts. But the mainstream media largely ignored the LIC debate.

The manufacture of New Militarist warfare 1982 – 1989

The third and final strand of New Militarism is the occasional operations that are given massive coverage in the media, against largely manufactured enemies. They emerge from a long history of changing military strategies that can be dated back to the mid-nineteenth century. MacKenzie (1984) has described the "spectacular theatre" of 19th century British militarism when press representations of heroic imperialist adventures in distant colonies had a considerable entertainment element. Featherstone (1993; 1993a) has also identified the way in which, the Victorian "small" wars of imperial expansion in Africa and India, were glorified for a dotting public by correspondents such as William Russell, G. A. Henty, Archibald Forbes and H.M. Stanley.

But Victorian newspapers and magazines did not have the social penetration of the mass media of today. And Victorian militarism was reinforced through a wide range of institutions and social activities: the Salvation Army, Church Army and uniformed youth organizations, rifle clubs, ceremonial and drill units in factories. "In all these ways, a very large proportion of the population came to have some connection with military and paramilitary organizations" (MacKenzie, op cit: p. 5 – 6). By the 1980s, this institutional and social militarism had given way to a new mediacentric, consumerist, entertainment militarism in which the mass media, ideologically aligned to a strong and increasingly secretive state, had assumed a dominant ideological role.

The traditional, industrialized militarism of the First and Second World Wars, in which the mass of the population participated in the war effort, either as soldiers or civilians, was founded on the widespread fear that the British state faced serious threats to its very existence. By the 1980s the supposed "threats" to Western interests came from puny Third World countries: and so the role of the media in these New Militarist adventures became even more critical in manufacturing the enemy as a credible "threat". During the 1980s, the military adventures of the UK in the Falklands (1982), the US in Grenada (1983), Libya (1986) and Panama (1989), culminating in the Iraq conflict of 1991, all bore the hallmarks of this new military/media strategy.

- The threat posed to US/Western interests in all these military interventions was either grossly exaggerated or non-existent. Significantly, the failure of the Soviet Union to intervene militarily in Poland in 1981 to crush the Solidarity movement under the leadership of Lech Walesa proved to the Western elites that the threat posed by their traditional "enemy" was waning. And so the permanent war economies of Britain and America (with their military/industrial complexes) needed the manufacture of "big enemies" to legitimise the

continued massive expenditure on the weapons of war. Hence the massive displays of US/UK force in all these adventures bore little relation to the threats posed.

- They were all quickie attacks. The Libya bombings lasted just 11 minutes. All the others were over within days.
- They were all largely risk free and fought from the air. Since reporters were banned from accompanying pilots on the fighter jets, the crucial air war was conducted largely in secret.
- All the attacks resulted in appalling civilian casualties. Yet the propaganda, in Orwellian style, claimed the raids were essentially for peaceful purposes. Casualty figures were covered up and the military hardware was constantly represented as “precise”, “surgical”, “modern” and “clean”.
- Central to the new strategy was the demonization of the enemy leaders. In the absence of any serious military force, this demonization served to represent the enemy states as credible threats.
- Media pools were deployed largely to keep journalists away from any action.
- All the invasions were celebrated in ecstatic language throughout the mainstream media. The editorial consensus remained firmly behind the military attacks. Administration lies were rarely challenged just as the global protests against the actions were largely ignored.

Defeat in Vietnam had proved to be a terrible trauma to the American military and political elites. With the waning of Soviet power in the 1980s, American imperialism could operate largely unchallenged. Victories were gained – and yet they were gained against largely puny Third World countries. The “Vietnam syndrome” could only be kicked in a “big” war. And Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 was to prove the perfect opportunity for the manufacture of this perfect “big” war.

The precedent is set: The Falklands/Malvinas adventure of 1982

On 14 April 1982, *The Times* featured a Gallup poll which indicated the public thought Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the grocer’s daughter from Grantham, Lincolnshire, was the worst prime minister in British history (see Dillon, 1989, p. 120). Soon afterwards, the victory of British forces in a manufactured, new militarist “war” – after Argentine invaded a group of tiny, largely unknown islands 8,000 miles away in the South Atlantic – transformed her into a national super-hero.

Moreover, the Falklands/Malvinas conflict was to set a hugely significant precedent for military strategists in future decades. Here was a First World country with a considerable military tradition behind it taking on a Third World country almost entirely dependent on First World countries for supplying its army. Crucially, Argentine was a militarist state, run by a corrupt military dictatorship and relying on a conscript army, where morale and discipline was known by British intelligence to be low (Bramley, 1991; Witherow, 1989). Britain, on the other hand, relied on a small, nuclearized professional army, strongly committed to fighting to win (Rogers, 1994, pp. 4 – 6).

Britain’s national security was hardly at stake in this little adventure for control of an unknown group of islands populated largely by penguins (Belgrano Action Group, 1988). But the logic of a permanent war economy is to fight wars. Involvement in the escapade could be realized for the British public only through their consumption of the patriotic press. As Shaw commented (1987, p. 154):

While Britain in the Second World War can be seen as the archetype ‘citizen war’ of total war through democratic mobilization, the Falklands are the vindication of small professional armed forces, acting on behalf of the nation but needing no real mass participation to carry out their tasks. For the vast majority involvement was limited to the utterly passive, vicarious consumption of exceptionally closely filtered news and the expression of support in opinion polls.

The press pool of 29 journalists (all male) who accompanied the Task Force to the islands was tightly controlled (Morrison & Tumber, 1988). Contrived delays in the transmission of television images meant that this was largely a bloodless war (Greenberg & Smith, 1982; McNair, 1995, p. 176). But not all the censorship was imposed by the state; journalists also indulged in self-censorship. There were pictures of dead bodies in the Press Association library that had been released by the Ministry, but newspaper editors decided not to use them (Taylor, 1992, p. 15). The press were exploited not only as transmitters of a symbolic demonstration of military power but also as propagandists to confuse and “disinform” the enemy. When landing on the Falklands was being planned, disinformation was leaked to the media and, inevitably, to the Argentineans (Harris, 1983, p. 92).

Grenada: the new militarist mission to escape Middle East humiliation

On 23 October 1983, a Mercedes containing 12,000lb of explosives was driven into the US marine compound in Beirut by a member of a Shi'a militia, Islamic Jihad, and blown up killing 241 Americans, there to bolster the CIA-regime of President Gemayal. On the same day a bomb exploded at the French military headquarters in Beirut killing 58 soldiers. Another humiliating American retreat was put into motion. According to Greg Palast, President Reagan was the first President of the United States to cravenly accede to the demands of terrorists when he gave in to Hezbollah's demand and ordered the Marines out of Lebanon (2006, p. 11).

But away on the Caribbean island of Grenada a crisis was unfolding that gave the US secret state a perfect opportunity to assert itself, and help to erase the memory of the Beirut disaster. The four-and-a-half year old government of Maurice Bishop's People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) had been the source of constant concern to the US elite. But with internecine strife breaking out in the ruling PRG, Bishop was executed on 19 October, with Bernard Coard and General Hudson Austin forming a new, Revolutionary Military Council.

On October 22, the Pentagon revealed that a naval task force comprising two aircraft carriers and around 1,900 Marines had been diverted from its course to Lebanon and was heading for Grenada. Operation Urgent Fury (as the Pentagon was to call it in the glitzy, Hollywood style that was to accompany all the US invasions) was launched. For the US elite it was a significant moment. It amounted to the first large-scale intervention in the hemisphere since the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 and the first overt deployment of US troops since Vietnam. Moreover, it was the first time Special Forces were deployed on a major scale since the launch of the revitalization programme two years earlier (Adams, 1987, p. 221).

The permanent war state was raring to go. In all, 7,300 US military personnel and 300 police from Jamaica, Barbados and St Lucia were involved. As Robert Freeman Smith (1994, p. 64) comments: 'Virtually every element in the US military played a role: airforce, navy, army (82nd Airborne), Marines, Army Rangers, Navy Seals and Delta Force. If the Los Angeles Police Department had requested a role they would probably have gotten a piece of the action.' Above all, it was an attempt to wipe out the memory of the military humiliation in Beirut with a massive, rapid, heavily censored raid. James Combs (1993) argues that the Grenada invasion was significant in the emergence of a new kind of media spectacle warfare. He argues:

Grenada was likely a preposterous military action producing no real results in terms of the array of power in the world, but it did help relegate the idea of intervention as beneficial and successful without producing a quagmire, nuclear exchange, large casualties and financial sacrifice by the citizenry ... War was now to be conducted with not only concern with military tactics but also with how the war looked as dramatic narrative seen almost instantaneously back home. (pp. 278 – 279)

All journalists were excluded from covering the invasion. The Joint Chiefs of Staff imposed total operational secrecy. Even White House spokesman Larry Speakes, who had described the idea of an invasion as "preposterous" in response to a CBS News inquiry on the eve of the operation, was excluded from National Security Council planning by White House Chief of Staff (and later Secretary of State) James Baker and not informed until after the first landings (Smith op cit). Some 400, mainly US journalists were left stranded in Barbados.

A few journalists did try to reach the island by speedboat but were fired at by a US fighter and turned back. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, who led the military action (and later the US-led coalition forces in the Gulf in 1991), records approvingly in his autobiography how one of the military commanders, Vice-Admiral Joseph Metcalf, responded to a question by one of the reporters involved: "Admiral, what would have happened if we hadn't turned around?" with the words: "We would have blown you right out of the water" (Schwarzkopf, 1992, p. 258).

Thrilled to blitz with Libyan bombings

Throughout the early 1980s Gaddafi was demonized in the mainstream US and UK media as a "terrorist warlord" and prime agent of a Soviet-inspired "terror network". Then, frustrated in its covert attempts to topple Gaddafi, the US government's strategy suddenly shifted. In March 1986, US planes patrolling the Gulf of Sidra were reported to have been attacked by Libyan missiles. But Chomsky (1991, p. 124) suggests this incident was a provocation "enabling US forces to sink several Libyan boats, killing more than 50 Libyans and, it was hoped, to incite Gaddafi to acts of terror against

Americans, as was subsequently claimed". In the following month, the US responded with a military strike on key Libyan targets. The attack was widely condemned.

For 11 minutes in the early morning of April 14, 1986, 30 US Air Force and Navy bombers struck Tripoli and Benghazi in a raid code-named El Dorado Canyon that left around 100 Libyans, mainly civilians, dead. Two incidents on successive days earlier in the month had provided the excuse. In the first, four Americans died when an explosion blew a hole in a TWA plane flying from Rome to Athens. In the second, a bomb explosion at la Belle Disco in West Berlin, frequented by US servicemen, killed three people and injured 229. Bleifuss (1990) records a report on 14 September 1990 on Radio *Deutsche Welle* suggesting that the CIA knew that a terrorist bombing of the disco was being planned but failed to maintain proper security – perhaps to give the Reagan administration a pretext to bomb Libya (see also Conor Gearty, 1991, pp. 83 – 7). Significantly, newsrooms were informed of the planned air strikes beforehand – but all held back from reporting until after the raid, thus showing the growing complicity between the media and the state over the handling of new militarist adventures (Trainor, 1991, p. 76).

Mrs Thatcher was perhaps hoping for an action-replay of the Falklands factor when she gave the US permission to fly F111 attack jets from bases in East Anglia to bomb Libya targets. Also, according to Machon (2005, p. 104), Mrs Thatcher was "anxious for revenge" after the shooting of W.P.C. Fletcher during a demonstration by Libyan oppositionists outside the Libyan embassy in London in 1984. It was an archetypal move of the secret state: only a select few in her cabinet were involved in the decision (Young 1989, p. 476). Yet the attack appeared to win little support from the public (Worcester 1991, p. 143). Harris, Gallup and MORI all showed substantial majorities opposed.

Much of the UK mainstream press, however, responded with jingoistic jubilation. The *Sun*'s front page screamed: "Thrilled to blitz: Bombing Gaddafi was my greatest day, says US airman." The *Mirror* concluded: "What was the alternative? In what other way was Colonel Gaddafi to be forced to understand that he had a price to pay for his terrorism?" The *Times* stressed: "The greatest threat to Western freedoms may be the Soviet Union but this does not make the USSR the only threat. The growth of terrorist states must be curbed while it can be curbed. The risks of extension of the conflict must be minimised. And in this case it would appear that it has been." The *Star*'s front page proclaimed: "Reagan was right." In the *Sunday Telegraph*, of 1 June, columnist Paul Johnson denounced the "distasteful whiff of pure cowardice in the air" as "the wimps" raised doubts about the US bombing of "terrorist bases" in Libya.

According to Kellner, the bombing was a manufactured crisis, staged as a media event and co-ordinated to coincide with the beginning of the 7pm news in the US (Kellner, 1990, p. 138). Two hours later President Reagan went on network television to justify the raid. Chomsky also argues that the attack was "the first bombing in history staged for prime-time television" (Chomsky, op cit., p. 127).

Yet the main purpose of the raid was to kill the Libyan President – dubbed a 'mad dog' by Reagan. Yallop (1994, p. 713) quotes "a member of the United States Air Force intelligence unit who took part in the pre-raid briefing": "Nine of 18 F111s that left from the UK were specifically briefed to bomb Gaddafi's residence inside the barracks where he was living with his family." In the event, the first bomb to drop on Tripoli hit Gaddafi's home killing Hana, his adopted daughter aged 15 months – while his eight other children and wife Safiya were all hospitalized, some with serious injuries.

The president escaped. But consider what outrage there would have been in the Western media if a Libyan bomb had killed one of Reagan's relatives. There was no such outrage over the Libyan deaths. Reports of US military action against Libya disappeared from the media after the 1986 assault. But away from the glare of publicity, the CIA launched its most extensive effort yet to spark an anti-Gaddafi coup. A secret army was recruited from among the many Libyans captured in border battles with Chad during the 1980s (Perry, 1992, p. 166). And as concerns grew in M16 that Gaddafi was aiming to develop chemical weapons, Britain funded various opposition groups in Libya.

The Panama invasion 1989

The Panama invasion was launched by US forces on 20 December 1989 (codenamed Operation Just Cause) – supposedly to arrest the country's leader, General Noriega, on drug charges. Some 24,000 troops participated in the invasion making it the largest US military operation since the Vietnam War (Goldman, 1991). It also constituted the twelfth US invasion of Panama since 1903 (Andersen, 2006, p. 147). The US armed forces used the rock music of Guns N'Roses and Elvis Presley played at maximum volume to 'terrorize' Noriega into surrendering on 3 January 1990.

For the first two days, media reports came from journalists detained in a warehouse. Some 100 additional reporters who accompanied the troops meekly returned home when they were told by the

military they had no facilities to service them (Rosenblum, 1993, p.126). Gary Woodward (1993, p. 11) argues that the media had no choice but to work alongside the military.

But as the Persian Gulf War loomed, members of the press would have good reason to rethink the wisdom of ceding editorial prerogative of prior restraint to pentagon planners. A general silence on this point throughout the tanker escort operation in 1987 and the later Panama invasion meant that coveted slots in press pools would come at a very high price (ibid)

The casualties cover-up again

In many respects the Panama invasion can be seen as another testing of the media/fighting strategy that was to be repeated during the Middle East massacres of 1991. At the heart of the Pentagon strategy was the representation of the attack as swift and clean. As Patrick Sloyan, of *Newsday*, commented, the muzzling of the press in Panama created “the illusion of bloodless battlefields” (Fund for Free Expression, 1991). And, according to John R. Macarthur (1993, p. 16): “What the administration prevented during the first thirty six hours of the Panama invasion were any eye-witness accounts or photographs of the shelling of El Chorrillo, the desperately poor neighbourhood in Panama City, where General Noriega’s headquarters were located.”

The Pentagon was at first reluctant to provide any casualty figures. Only three weeks after the invasion did Southern Command say that 202 Panamanian civilians and 314 soldiers had died. Later it reduced the figure for military casualties down to 50 (Andersen, 1991, p. 24). Yet the Spanish language press both within and outside the US (InterPress Service, *Echo*, of Mexico) cited more than 2,000 deaths and approximately 70,000 casualties. The National Council of Churches and the Red Cross also estimated the total civilian deaths may have numbered 2,000 at a minimum (Gellhorn, 1990). A number of mass graves were discovered after the invasion.

Only 23 US soldiers were reported to have died in the operation. After *Newsweek* reported that as many as 60 per cent of these casualties may have resulted from US action (known in euphemistic militaryspeak and uncritically adopted by the media as ‘friendly fire’) the Pentagon announced for the first time that US action accounted for two of the 23 deaths and 19 of the 324 injuries (Woodward, B., 1991, p. 195).

Demonization of Noriega

As was to be later echoed in media coverage of the Iraq and Kosovo crises, much of the media coverage of the Panama invasion focused on the personality of General Manuel Antonio Noriega as newly defined by the Bush administration. He was accused of brutally suppressing the results of an election a few months earlier and of heading a huge drug-running operation.

Most of the coverage downplayed the history of US involvement with Noriega. He was recruited by the CIA’s chief of station in Lima, Peru, in 1959 to provide information on his fellow students at the Peruvian Military academy and his links with central American drug barons and US administrations were close, in particular while George Bush Senior was briefly head of the CIA during the Ford administration (1975 – 76) (Perry op cit., pp. 110 – 15). Noriega is said to have had met Bush Senior personally twice – in 1976 and 1983 (Tisdall, 2010). In 1984 Noriega refused to accept the election victory of Arnulfo Arias and installed, to US applause, Nicolas Ardito Barletta in his place. But by 1989 Noriega had drawn the wrath of the Bush administration for refusing to co-operate in Col. Oliver North’s plan to use a shipload of arms to accuse the Nicaraguan Sandinistas of smuggling weapons to the Salvadorian rebels. Then, more significantly, the administration wanted to revoke the Panama treaties of 1977 (signed by President Jimmy Carter and Panamanian strongman Torrijos) according to which control of the Panama Canal was to pass into Panamanian hands.

After Noriega was arrested he was put on trial in Miami on 10 narrowly defined drug-related charges and sentenced to 40 years in prison. As Tisdall comments (op cit), the trial heard nothing about Noriega’s contacts with CIA chief William Casey and other key figures in the Reagan and Bush administrations “who, allegedly connived in the supply of arms to Nicaragua’s Contra rebels paid for with Medellin cartel drug cash”. Tisdall continues (ibid): “The outcome of the Miami trial, like the 1989 invasion, was never in doubt. It was a show trial, a warning to others. It was pure vengeance. It was a cover-up of decades of illicit regional meddling. But it was also a demonstration of raw American power, of which the world was soon to have more frightening examples.”

The manufacture of the “big war” against “global monster Saddam” in 1991

By the time US-led forces prepared to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait in January 1991, a military/media propaganda system that had evolved over the previous decade had matured. What this meant was that any conflict could be fought in almost entire secrecy – even in the face of 24-hour saturation coverage.

The Iraqi army was constantly represented in the US and UK press in the run-up to the conflict as one million-strong, the fourth largest in the world, battle-hardened after an eight year war with Iran, led by monster madman Saddam Hussein. When in January and February 1991, Iraqi soldiers were deserting in droves and succumbing to one slaughter after another, Fleet Street still predicted the largest ground battle since the Second World War. Images of enormous Iraqi defensive structures with massive beams and a highly sophisticated system of underground trenches filled the media. In the end there was nothing more than a walkover, a rout. A barbaric slaughter buried beneath the fiction of heroic warfare (Keeble, 1997, p. 5).

From a military standpoint the many thousands of soldiers in the Gulf in 1991 were irrelevant. As part of an attempt to revive the heroic images of the Second World War and as a symbolic assertion of the heroic possibilities of major warfare, they were essential. Most crucially, the manufactured conflict provided a theater in which the US could win a “big” war and “kick the Vietnam syndrome”. Argentina, Grenada, Libya and Panama were all under-developed countries while the US/UK’s military adventures were largely conducted in secret. Now in 1991 with 24-hour coverage the “big” war could crucially be seen.

Journalists were the real prisoners of war, trapped behind the barbed wire of reporting curbs, according to William Boot (1991, p. 24). Very few journalists were allowed to travel with the troops; little actual combat was observed since reporters were denied access to planes; most were confined to hotels in Saudi Arabia. Colin Powell, in his account of the conflict (1995) estimated that 250,000 Iraqi soldiers had been eliminated. And yet the media celebrated the strikes of the US-led forces as “clean”, “surgical” and “humanitarian”. Shots from video cameras on missiles heading towards their targets (shown on television and reproduced in the press) meant that spectators actually “became” the weapons.

As Robins and Levidow argued (1991, p. 324): “The remote technology served to portray as heroic ‘combat’ what was mainly a series of massacres.” According to Cummings (1992, p. 121), the 1991 conflict appeared not as “blood and guts spilled in living colour on the living room rug” but through a “radically distanced, technically controlled, eminently ‘cool’ postmodern optic”. Kellner (1992, p. 386) described it ironically as the “perfect war”. Indeed, out of 353 “allied” deaths only 46 were killed in combat (Keeble 1997, p. 159). Of those, 24 (52 per cent) were killed by so-called “friendly fire” (military jargon that has slipped so effortlessly into the lexicon of contemporary conflict).

British Tornado fighter pilots were constantly dubbed “Top Gun” heroes in the patriotic pops. Don McKay, based in Bahrain for the *Mirror*, explained the use of the reference in this way: “They were ‘Top Gun’ heroes. They were the high echelon of pilots. It’s a generic term, a form of shorthand. It’s not implying they were gung-ho. They were not fools. They were not cowboys. It’s like in the First World War they were called ‘Biggles’. It’s a suggestion of bravery.”¹

The Iraqi army could never pose a threat to the mightiest army ever assembled. Inevitably then, the emphasis by the mainstream media, military and politicians on the demonized Saddam Hussein as a “global monster”, the “new Hitler” and “evil madman” was the crucial ingredient in the manufacture of the “big” war (Keeble, 1998; Smith, 1999, p. 210). Around 1,600 people, mostly women and children, perished when the Amiriyah shelter was bombed by an American Stealth jet during the Gulf massacres of 1991 (Petley, 2003). Yet at the time most of Fleet Street blamed “Saddam”, described it as a propaganda coup for the Iraqi leader, or claimed it was inevitable (Keeble 1997, pp 166 – 172; Simpson, 2010, pp. 516 – 518). The *Daily Mail* and *Express* even reserved their outrage for the BBC whose on-the-spot reporter, Jeremy Bowen, looked distinctly distressed as he consistently refused to be drawn by anchorman Michael Buerk to say the shelter appeared to have a dual military purpose. Brent Sadler, on ITN, gave a similar version. “Amiriyah is a middle class residential area. I could see no military or strategic targets in the vicinity.”

Another way in which the press hid the horror of the massacres was to hype them into a fun event. Barbarism became a big joke. As Roy Greenslade, *Mirror* editor, remarked, the war after a while got boring and so his paper was obliged to “mix it up” with “razzamatazz and entertainment”. He explained:

Tabloids are both a contributing factor and a response to the alienation of the working class from political life, social relationships and their old traditions of solidarity . . . People have turned their

backs on the political system and industrial organisation and sought a kind of leisure. Thus a serious subject, if it is not to lose their attention, has to be covered in a way to feed their diet of fun. This even includes war.²

Following a similar agenda, the *Sun* tried to encourage its women readers to “Flash your knickers for our brave boys: Go give ‘em a frill”, accompanying the story with a picture of a woman bending over and showing her knickers. “Who bares wins,” the paper added. On January 29, 1991, the *Sun* carried Gulf “war” jokes under the headline: “Giggle at the Gulf”. For example: “Iraqi soldiers are changing their socks every day – because they smell de-feet.” On February 2, the paper highlighted the “hilarious new slang used by US troops in the Saudi desert”. For instance, BAM (Big Assed Marine: women officers); BMD (Black Moving Object: Iraqi woman dressed in Arabic robes).

All the editors, safe in their Fleet Street bunkers, backed the Desert Storm assaults on Iraq, as did the vast majority of commentators. And so the New Militarist consensus held firm. As early as August 3, 1990, immediately after the invasion of Kuwait, virtually all of Fleet Street had gone on a war footing calling for strikes against the newfound monster “Saddam”. Only the *Guardian* expressed scepticism throughout.

Conclusion

The New Militarist strategy was to continue well into the new century. Media-hyped, spectacular “wars” were waged – as in Somalia (1992 – 93), Serbia (1999), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). With reporters embedded alongside the military, coverage remained tightly controlled. Low intensity conflicts were continuing in Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq – and occasionally “major operations”, where the US-led forces could claim victories against strangely shadowy enemies, were celebrated in the press. On February 12, 2010, for instance, Operation Moshtarak (Pashtun for “Together”) was launched in Afghanistan against an estimated 100 Taliban insurgents – and billed as the biggest US military offensive since the invasion of 2001.

Yet still secret warfare remained of paramount importance. For instance, alongside the media-hyped Operation Moshtarak, a secret war away from the media was being waged. This included:

- Targeted assassinations in both Afghanistan and over the border in Pakistan of alleged Taliban leaders,
- Night raids by the CIA and some of its 56,000 Special Forces (such as the Green Berets and Navy SEALs),
- Secret detention and torture centres,
- Many disappearances
- Pakistan military offensives against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, instigated by Washington, which claimed thousands of lives and displaced over a million people in the north-western tribal areas (Keeble, 2010).

If peace journalism theory and practice are to challenge effectively dominant attitudes they clearly need to acknowledge more the role of the secret armies in US/UK military strategies – and the crucial part played by the media in the manufacture of New Militarist “warfare”.

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End Notes

¹ Don McKay interviewed by the author, in London, June 1991.

² Roy Greenslade, interviewed by the author, in London, June 1991.

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